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Relocating, Downsizing, and Merging: Inventory Projects to Manage Change in a Digital Environment

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CHAPTER 9

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ABSTRACT

With a new library location and newly created librarian position, the Health Sciences Library (HSL) of the University Libraries at the University of Memphis needed a comprehensive inventory. Having previously completed a small-scale inventory, technical services librarians led the project to assess the HSL collection before the newly hired librarian arrived. Beyond ensuring that all materials were in the collection and reflected properly in the integrated library system (ILS), an up-to-date inventory asserts the value of the physical collections to a variety of campus stakeholders. This chapter offers ideas for working collaboratively with personnel across library departments to conduct and complete a major technical services project.

INTRODUCTION

The role of technical services in the modern academic library is contextual. The functions, services, workflows, and priorities must be defined by the vision and mission of the library and larger institution. Nonetheless, one of the constants across diverse academic libraries and their component departments is change. Technical services departments must respond agilely to an unpredictable future and its often unknowable needs. When technical services librarians can help

prepare for the future, and not merely respond to change, they can add immense value.

A colleague recently identified the perception that technical services librarians serve as gatekeepers of opaque processes. This may create the impression that they are change-averse and move slowly. One of the misconceptions that the authors recently heard regarding technical services at our own institution is that it does not directly support the mission of the university. Perhaps this misconception is because technical services employees often work behind the scenes and infrequently teach or serve students face-to-face. By proposing, and quickly completing, an inventory project that had clear implications for public services, the authors and their technical services colleagues at the University of Memphis proved themselves partners in fulfilling the mission and vision of the university. The inventory project was part of an effort to prepare the University of Memphis's health sciences collection for a newly created health sciences librarian position. This collection had been created approximately two years prior, from the merger of a now-defunct branch library and a subset of materials from the main library and is housed in the newly constructed Health Sciences Library (HSL). By embracing this opportunity to help, not only a new colleague, but also the university, the technical services librarians demonstrated their willingness and ability to act quickly and to support the university's broader mission. Completing this project in two months, before the arrival of the new health sciences librarian, influenced public services staff's, as well as our own, perceptions of technical services within University of Memphis libraries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolution and future of technical services has been a common theme throughout the literature. Considering the dynamic nature of technical processes in the digital age, it makes good sense that those of us engaged in the work ponder its future. Several librarians have written about the positive and negative impact of automation software on library technical services.[1] Beyond the initial automation of shared cataloging applications feeding into online public access catalogs (OPAC), opportunities to partially or fully automate technical

services have only increased. The future is unpredictable, but despite the vast changes in the past several decades, the need for information professionals to mediate the information deluge has been established. According to Bradford Lee Eden, "technical services staff, with their unique skills, talents, abilities, and knowledge in relation to the organization and description of information, are desperately needed in the new information environment."[2] Automation has also brought considerable change to inventory processing in the past decades. Several libraries began to conduct inventories with handheld devices in the 1990s.[3] Both Martha Loesch and Jim Womack documented the use of integrated library system (ILS)–generated lists to conduct large-scale inventories at their respective institutions.[4] Ernick documented the use of Innovative Interfaces' Millennium inventory control processes to conduct inventory in a small academic library setting.[5] Greenwood discussed the automation and modification of University of Mississippi's inventory processes, including the adoption of Sung, Whisler, and Sung's[6] 2009 electronic inventory and shelf-reading program, Library Stacks Management System.[7] Many authors have written about the inventory implications for radio frequency identification (RFID) in libraries.[8] For libraries whose collections are not yet RFID tagged or who are reluctant to fully automate inventory processing, locally defined inventory processes with varying degrees of automation should be pursued. This chapter documents the challenges and opportunities of inventorying dynamic collections to manage change.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The University of Memphis is an urban research university with a fall 2019 enrollment of 21,685 and a Carnegie Classification of Doctoral Universities: Higher Research Activity. The university does not have a medical school, but the expansion and strength of existing health science programs helped to ensure the funding of a new Community Health Building, which officially opened August 2015. By approving for hire a new health sciences librarian position, the administration seemed to prioritize library support for the newly constructed Community Health Building and the academic programs housed therein.

The University Libraries at the University of Memphis comprises three branch libraries and Ned R. McWherter Library (McWherter), the main library. There were previously several branch libraries whose collections were extensively weeded before being subsumed into the main collection. Unfortunately, not all of the weeding and transfer processing was accurately reflected in the ILS. Within McWherter, the primary public services departmental divisions include circulation, special collections, administration, and research and instructional services (which comprises learning commons and government publications). There is no official technical services unit or designated head; cataloging, library information systems, and collection management (which includes interlibrary loan, acquisitions, electronic resources, and collection development) perform traditional technical services work. All these unit department heads report directly to the associate dean. The inventory project was spearheaded by Gail Perkins Barton, then interim head of collection management and Rachel Scott, ILS librarian.

The authors knew that the new incoming health sciences librarian would benefit from a recently inventoried collection. After all, conducting inventory is how one determines what is available, and by omission, what is no longer available. One of the primary responsibilities of the subject librarian is to be familiar with resources relevant to their discipline and know which resources are available within the local collection.[9] The accuracy of the health sciences collection as represented in the ILS would facilitate the incoming health sciences librarian's familiarity with available resources and provide concrete data concerning prior use and acquisition of these materials. Preparing the collection for an incoming colleague would empower him or her to understand the scope of the collection and facilitate the future public services work.

Another concern was ensuring that all items in this collection were cataloged, even if they were historically browsing collections. In addition to expanding and supporting the health sciences, the University of Memphis has an initiative, UofM Global, to expand and support distance education offerings. This means that some health sciences students and faculty may never browse the physical library shelves, which heightens the need for all titles and resources to be adequately described in online catalogs. In the next section, the authors will

explain how personnel worked collaboratively across technical services units to process the relocated, downsized, and merged collection.

CHANGE IN THE ILS

The ILS librarian must continually learn how best to leverage the library system as the powerful tool it can be and investigate when processes might be automated. Innovative Interface Inc.'s Sierra database reporting and inventory functions were essential to the success of this project. Additionally, MARC record editing tools facilitated the bulk creation of bibliographic and item records for the previously unprocessed dissertations based on minimal data. Before the newly hired health sciences librarian arrived at the University of Memphis, the authors coordinated efforts to ensure that the collection was accurately represented in the ILS. Prior inventories had been conducted from print shelf lists or using an ILS-specific inventory product called Circa. No comprehensive inventory had been completed in the institutional memory of the University Libraries. This project is the first complete inventory project to be conducted not using the endorsed ILS product, but by uploading files of barcodes directly to the ILS to update the fixed-length field "inventory date" in the item record.

Circa, the ILS inventory function, requires a steady wireless signal and was found to be too cumbersome. The person conducting inventory with Circa must understand the various fixed- and variable-length fields in the item record. When, for example, an item that has been marked as lost, withdrawn, or in-transit is scanned in Circa, an error message is prompted. The person scanning must know enough about the collection and the relative importance of this message to respond appropriately. The authors were concerned that if this product were used to conduct inventory, too many items would be pulled for further investigation. To simplify inventory processing on the front-end, the ILS librarian used Sierra Admin's off-line circulation "compare inventory to shelf list" process to add an inventory date to the item record of each record with a barcode scanned. This feature allows a text file (.txt) of barcodes to be uploaded to the circbatch directory on the application server. Therefore, participants with little or no technical system training in reading the various fields could still contribute in

a robust manner to this project by scanning the barcode of each book into a text file to share with the ILS librarian.

Several problems were encountered and addressed along the way. When preparing to consolidate materials from the defunct speech and hearing branch and main library into the newly built HSL two years ago, attempts to weed and withdraw some of the content had left materials that were still on the shelf suppressed from online public access catalogs and discovery layers. Conversely, several titles marked as available in the ILS were not inventoried and not found in any library collection. Interdepartmental communication and collaboration were essential as problem items, including previously uncatalogued theses and obsolete formats, were discovered and systematically processed. Collection management staff were trained to use the newly created workflows for the project to be completed in a timely manner. They continued their daily duties as they worked part-time on the project, which was located approximately two miles away from the main library. In the end, over 6,400 items were inventoried, 150 titles were added, and several hundred incorrect item statuses were updated in the ILS.

One of the main factors that propelled this project forward quickly was the urgency and support displayed by senior library faculty and administration. With all health sciences librarian candidate interviews complete, and an offer imminent, there was tremendous acceptance by library faculty who saw wisdom in having a collection that was orderly and properly reflected in the ILS. Having already completed a very small but successful scanning project a few months earlier in the main library, the two technical services librarians and many staff involved in this project were pleased to see the urgency expressed in tackling the inventory at the HSL. With the encouragement and support of the library faculty and expertise from a previous small project, planning began immediately. The collection management department already had a student employee in place for a few weeks of summer work and immediately redirected responsibilities to the scanning at the HSL. One of the experienced staff members was asked to oversee the schedule and encourage others to sign up for a regular shift to work at the HSL. This broadened the investment of many whose schedule allowed for participation in the extra project.

The authors adjusted, acknowledging challenges encountered, for example: designating a devoted laptop, barcode scanner, an extra-long

power cord, and a portable station, as well as addressing uncatalogued dissertations with no records or spine labels. However, some challenges were unavoidable. Since the HSL is located on the south campus, away from the main part of the university and the University Libraries, it was difficult to orchestrate the continual scanning since employees had to travel to the location, set up the computer, resume scanning a section, close and send the files, and then return to the main campus and daily duties. It would have been ideal for one person to oversee the project on south campus, but that was not possible. Even though the student employee scanned some each day, oversight of the project was difficult from afar. The health sciences staff in that library are not part of technical services and needed to continue with regular duties, assisting students and other library users, because summer school was in session at the time this project began, although they did provide some background knowledge and history that was quite useful.

CHANGE IN PHYSICAL COLLECTIONS

One surprise on the first inventory planning trip to the HSL was the discovery of a browsing section of uncatalogued dissertations that had been provided by students or professors throughout the years. Some of those in the browsing section also had a duplicate already cataloged and on the shelf; others did not. One result of this project was the cataloging of those dissertations and completion of the necessary physical processing. They were then moved to the oversize section for books that exceed 27 centimeters in height, which follows the same model as the main library. In addition to preparing and later moving the browsing section, other dissertations that were interfiled in the regular size collection were identified by the ILS librarian, pulled, and prepared for the oversize location with additional labels created by cataloging.

The HSL collection was already configured with shelf height established like that used in the main campus library, which includes a separate oversize area. With that collection increasing by over 150 items, it was important to have enough room available. However, that section was unable to shift forward due to the periodical section being directly adjacent to it. In collaboration with the HSL staff, a decision

was made to shift the oversize items backward by one section because there were several empty in that area. This small change helped to accommodate oversize section growth; considering changes to local collection development policies to acquire more textbooks, this move was prudent.

Inventory participants across technical service units brought helpful expertise to the project. Staff in cataloging had knowledge of some HSL items that were awaiting corrections in their backlog and not reflected properly in the library catalog. They worked to resolve the issues and returned the books to the HSL after inventory. Also, there were personnel in collection management that had knowledge of the transfer process and even participated in preparing many nursing-related items from the main library to the HSL two years ago. Having the experience of working to transfer the items from the main campus library to the HSL was a benefit to the project; several books were found that never made it to the HSL and remained in McWherter. These were discovered when staff searched McWherter for items listed as "not on the shelf" or "missing" after scanning was complete. In brief, there were items in the HSL with a McWherter location listed in the catalog and vice versa. Many were identified, the location corrected, and the book physically placed in the correct location. Having a deeply ingrained desire to link patrons with needed material, the collection management personnel worked regularly to correct the physical issues discovered and ensure that the book was properly labeled and readied for discovery and use.

Occasionally, however, specific processes slowed the inventory project. For example, the authors initially considered moving the 150 uncatalogued dissertations to McWherter so that they could be more fully cataloged. Instead, the ILS librarian went to the HSL, applied temporary handwritten spine labels, and added barcodes to item records after bulk creating brief bibliographic and item records, which greatly expedited the record creation process. Cataloging created new and permanent spine labels and collection management personnel applied the labels before shelving the dissertations in their new location in the oversize area. Another label project was discussed, but ultimately postponed. During inventory scanning, several participants remarked on severely faded spine labels that were difficult to read. Though a worthwhile project, replacing the faded labels would have

been a competing focus. No technical services personnel have individual spine label printers and all label printing goes through cataloging. After the first attempt at compiling a text file for cataloging, it was evident that the task would be quite large and take focus off the main effort at hand. It was decided that the spine labels could easily be identified later simply by walking through the stacks.

CONCLUSION

The timing was right for this project. It was inspiring to collaborate with colleagues to ensure a warm welcome and smooth transition for a new colleague. It was also just before the beginning of the summer term, when fewer users were in the library. When working on a project that involves barcode scanner beeping, physical processing of materials in the main reading room, and occasional discussions among workers, it is best to do so during a time when fewer library users are attempting to work or study in that location. A way to silence the barcode scanner was found in the barcode operation manual, but it also was determined that the person scanning depends on the sound as an auditory cue to move on to the next barcode. A regular glance to the screen is needed to verify whether the whole barcode is registered into the text file, so a re-scan can be done before moving too far along. Without the sound from the barcode reader, the person scanning is too occupied by watching the screen to see when the barcode displays and causes a slight delay. Another important consideration is the amount of activity within the collection while a project of this type is ongoing. For returning items to be included in the inventory, HSL staff emptied the book drop and assembled returned items on a designated cart to be scanned on a regular basis.

Open communication and support from leaders are essential to successful project management, especially in transitions. In this case, the two technical services librarians were in constant communication and offered praise and recognition of team members for the accomplishment of tasks along the way, reminding them of the importance of this project to the incoming HSL librarian as well as to all University Libraries users. The lead librarians remained positive and flexible and provided support as needed.

Though it was not a part of their regular workflow, many collection management staff went to the HSL and completed the physical processing of dissertations, which had been added to the catalog. This required adding tattle tape and the property stamp, applying newly created spine labels, and relocating the dissertations to the oversize area in the library. Working from a list created by the ILS librarian, collection management staff pulled the dissertations, which were processed but still located in the regular shelves, and moved them to the oversize area as well. In addition, employees from collection management checked the main library as well as the HSL for items that were missing or not found in the expected location, involving the staff there when their schedules allowed. Being a small team, communication about the progress was not complex. Each week, and often daily, the department received an update either in person or by email from the librarians. The team was diligent and willing to assist with various tasks as needed, which expanded the expertise of the collection management personnel, including several who were somewhat new to the department.

Working closely together, cataloging, collection management, and ILS librarians and staff gained a deeper respect for each other and the work accomplished in technical services. More importantly, the impact of this work on library users was made quite clear. When items are incorrectly labeled, missing, or otherwise unable to be found as reflected in the ILS, the resource may as well never have been purchased. The two librarians leading this project were careful to be supportive, provide feedback, and keep the purpose of the project ever before the team members. As the project ended, those who participated expressed a sense of accomplishment for their part in the project and said that it was rewarding to have collaborated to realize such an impactful change. This initial inventory project has changed attitudes about technical services and has already created considerable buy-in for an ongoing inventory. Employees in both technical and public services now collaborate on inventory projects, large and small.

Overall, the importance of knowing what is on the shelf and how it is reflected in the ILS is essential to quality library service. Librarians and staff of technical services units are vital in keeping the collection organized and ready for discovery and use. The functions of the public services areas depend on the work of technical services.

However, this work is largely invisible; few outside technical services are even aware of the decisions, processes, and maintenance that go into achieving seamless access to materials. When resource problems arise, technical services come to the forefront quickly to investigate and solve the problem. They then again calmly retreat behind the scenes to continue the quality control that creates smooth access for libraries and users alike. Adapting to change and having a plan to address upheavals such as closing and/or merging collections, deep deselection, or the other collection crises is crucial in guiding one's library through uncertainty and keeping the collection healthy today and for many tomorrows.

The relevance of this case study might not be immediately applicable to readers. Indeed, the local circumstances and institution-specific details may render the outlined approach to conducting inventory less useful to other institutions. Nonetheless, the authors conclude with five recommendations that are more broadly useful for a variety of technical services projects.

1. *Timing is everything:* consider staffing and user schedules and tap into projects with momentum.
2. *Communication is key:* before personnel can provide support or buy into a project, they must be informed about it.
3. *Many hands make light work:* the more people supporting and engaged in the project, the quicker and more accurate the work.
4. *Variety is the spice of life:* technical services work can lack variety and short-term projects can provide a welcome break.
5. *R-E-S-P-E-C-T:* taking the time to coordinate interdepartmental projects instills a deeper understanding and respect for our technical services colleagues.

NOTES

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